Jury Still Out on Usefulness of U.S. Army's FCS Gear

By KATE BRANNEN

The various pieces of gear developed for the Future Combat Systems (FCS) work, but they have yet to prove operationally useful.

That's the informal word from the U.S. Army, which completed a limited user test of the equipment on Sept. 28 at White Sands Missile Range, N.M. No formal results have been released from the tests, which evaluated the Tactical and Urban Unattended Ground Sensors, the Class 1 Unmanned Aircraft System, the Small Unmanned Ground Vehicle and the Network Integration Kit.

"They performed well technically; now we need to get the operational perspective," said Col. John Wendel, the program manager for the Army's infantry brigade combat team modernization program.

The Army is buying a set of the equipment for the 3rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the 1st Armored Division, which is scheduled to deploy with the equipment in 2012.

In the next two months, service leaders will hold a series of meetings to discuss the feedback from the soldiers of the Army Evaluation Task Force and then decide what else they want to purchase.

The current plan is to buy two more brigade-sized sets of the equipment.

On Dec. 22, Army program officials will present their proposal to Pentagon acquisition chief Ashton Carter.

Reliability: Improved

In last year's tests, the FCS gear proved unreliable and not up to the technical requirements, said Maj. Gen. John Bartley, program executive officer for integration. That drew criticism in the spring from U.S. lawmakers, who asked Army officials why the service was pouring money into unproven systems.

So "we focused our intentions from last year's concerns to go address reliability," said Paul Geery, Boeing program manager for the Brigade Combat Team Modernization program.

Boeing is the program's prime contractor.

That led to 160 changes that made the equipment more dependable and allowed it to meet requirements in this year's test, Geery said.

With the technical issues mostly settled, the systems' operational relevance needs to be determined.

"There will be a decision about, 'Is the operational utility good enough for the Army to decide to go buy hundreds of these to go put them in the field?'" Geery said.

"Now it's time for the users, the testers and the Army to come together and say, 'This is what we're buying and this is what we're not buying.' "

Col. John Wendel
U.S. Army program manager

Army officials told concerned members of Congress last spring that if the equipment doesn't work or soldiers don't think it's useful, the Army won't buy it.

Bartley said the limited user test is the hardest because even if the new equipment meets all of the requirements, soldiers ultimately decide whether it improves the way they operate.

"We're doing this all for the warfighters, so ultimately, the Army staff will come to a conclusion to get the best capability fielded," Wendel said.

The Army is currently waiting on formal assessments of the equipment from Training and Doctrine Command and Test and Evaluation Command.

"Until we get our work graded, we won't know," Wendel said. "We're guardedly optimistic. We know it will be a mixed report."

That report will be the topic of discussion at a series of upcoming Pentagon meetings.

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'Pivotal Meeting' Looms

On Nov. 5, the Army is to hold an Overarching Integrated Product Team meeting to prepare for a Nov. 19 meeting of the Army Systems Acquisition Review Council.

"That is a pretty pivotal meeting, because that's where we're going to look at performance versus requirements versus user feedback," Wendel said.

In early December, an Overarching Integrated Product Team from the Office of the Secretary of Defense will meet to prepare for the Dec. 22 Defense Acquisition Board Review led by Carter.

If approval is granted, the Army plans to award contracts as soon as possible, especially for long-lead items for the Ground Mobile Radio.

The radio and its software-defined waveforms are the centerpiece of the Network Integration Kit, the communications backbone that allows other systems — like the sensors, robots and UAVs — to plug into and share data.

Bartley said improvements to the radios and waveforms have allowed the Army to show that the network is viable, which service officials are very excited about.

"Heretofore, we didn't have that basic architecture and, quite frankly, the backbone wasn't ready to handle it," he said. □

E-mail: kbrannen@defensenews.com.